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ABSTRACT

Current thinking about academic language and the variety of language appropriate to school and similar settings is discussed. Recent literature concerning academic language is explored, and common themes and significant observations that emerge when the concept is viewed from a sociological perspective are examined. The research reviewed includes investigations of language minority students' control of the English called for in the decontextualized language situations of the classroom, and the features and functions of academic language. Four major themes are identified: that (1) academic language is grounded in school culture; (2) academic language is primarily non-interactive; (3) linguistic skill is necessary for academic language proficiency; and (4) academic language proficiency depends on content knowledge, particularly metalinguistic knowledge. The place for academic language is in the social context of the classroom and similar settings. Further research in this area should focus on successful and less successful classroom interactions, participant accounts of behaviors and beliefs, the language requirements of specific registers, and techniques for maximizing the use of language skills children bring with them to the classroom. (MSE)

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ACADEMIC LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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For sociolinguists and anthropologists, at least, it is axiomatic that a variety of language skills are called for in a variety of different situations. The ability to speak a language includes knowledge of appropriateness rules as well as knowledge of the structures and forms needed to put those rules into action.

Therefore it should come as no surprise that we might argue for the existence of something like "academic language" or some variety of language appropriate to school and similar settings. This notion has recently engendered a good deal of discussion among those concerned with the education of language minority students. High failure rates have, in particular, led eduators and researchers to question the adequacy and appropriateness of the education, especially the language education, that is being provided for these students. (We should note, of course, that similar observations are being made with regard to native-English speaking minority groups, but we will be focusing today on students from non-English backgrounds.)

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The role of language in education cannot be underestimated. In fact, it has been referred to by a number of people as the "hidden agenda" of schooling -- both in the sense that it constitutes a large portion of what is taught and also that it

serves as a covert metric for evaluation and differentiation of students. As Peters (1986) observes:

> "In the academic context, language both spoken and written typically has a consitutive rather than an ancillary role; that is, it constitutes the whole of the ongoing activity in the social situation rather than serves as an accompaniment to other activities."

For students learning the language of the schools as a second language, its role takes on added significance.

In the next few minutes, we will briefly review the work of some of the major contributors to thinking about academic language and then we will suggest some common themes and additional observations that emerge when the concept is viewed from a sociolinguistic perspective.

We can begin our discussion by posing the central question: What are the language skills required for childrens' success in school?

Cummins (1980) has pointed out that often language minority students are assumed to have English proficiency on the basis of their adequate performance in face-to-face communicative situations. But the same students who do well in conversation often meet with failure on school tasks. Such children may then be viewed as having cognitive deficits, because it appears that they don't have trouble with English. If language is not the problem, then it must be that they just don't have the intellectual skills they need for success at school. However, there is evidence to suggest that a good part of the problem is often a lack of control over the English called for in the decontextualized language situations of the classroom. To avoid a misassessment of children's language abilities, Cummins

suggests that we look at how children perform not only in what he calls basic conversational skills, but also at their skills in academic language tasks.

One challenge for researchers, then, is to determine what comprises skill in academic language; that is, what the language skills are that are necessary for success in school. Literacy in itself does not guarantee academic language proficiency. Success in academic language calls for the ability to interact in the school setting in ways that are particular to the school culture in our society. These ways may or may not mirror the uses of reading and writing outside the schools, in the cultures from which non-mainstream children come.

One feature of academic language which is mentioned repeatedly in research is the ability to communicate in context-reduced situations. Catherine Snow (1983, 1984), for instance, defines decontextualized language as language in which the author is impersonal, the setting is distant, relatively complex language is used, and which must be understood from the speaker's or writer's point of view. Examples she gives include presenting monologues, doing abstract verbal reasoning, and giving metalinguistic judgments, such as judging sentences as grammatical or ungrammatical, identifying ambiguity, and giving definitions. According to Snow, the process of education consists largely of training in decontextualized language use. Cummins reaches a similar conclusion when he suggests that situations calling for academic language proficiency vary along two dimension: contextualized vs. decontextualized and

cognitively demanding vs. cognitively undemanding.

Cook-Gumperz and Gumperz (1981) point out that both interactive and linguistic features of academic language must be taken into account. In written discourse, the lack of prosodic features such as intonation or stress means that children have fewer cues to meaning and must learn how distinctions between new and given information can be made syntactically and lexically rather than through prosody. For example, the sentence "The people were just recovering from the long famine when the war broke out" would need to be transformed considerably in a written version, to clarify the temporal relationship; that is, which fact, the war or the famine, is the new information. They also point out that in school children are exposed to new kinds of interactions, where, for example, they have to make explicit information which in an everyday context could be taken for granted. An obvious example is responding to known information questions to demonstrate knowledge acquired. Knowing that a teacher wants a real answer to a question like "How many chips am I holding?" is not automatic!

Shirley Heath identifies six functions of language used in school -- to label and describe, to recount past events, to follow directions without needing sustained personal reinforcement, to sustain and maintain social interactions, to request and clarify information and to create new information and integrate ideas in innovative ways. These skills require that the child understands the classroom culture and the genres in which the school expects information to be related, such as appropriate ways of questioning. In her research, she has

explored the differences in background experiences that facilitate development of these functions, in comparison with what is assumed in the school setting.

Four major themes, then, run throughout the discussions of academic language. First, academic language is grounded in the school culture and requires knowledge of the ways of that culture for success. The child must know the ways of using language in school, including conventions of speaking and writing in interaction and academic tasks, and knowing what the school considers important, valuable, and unique.

Second, academic language is primarily non-interactive. In most academic tasks, meaning must be constructed by the individual alone, without benefit of social interaction. This poses a major problem for children's acquisition of academic language proficiency, since the rate of development of children's language has been shown to be associated with interactive features, such as a consistent attempt by adults to understand the meaning intentions of the child, and a willingness to make those intentions the basis for further conversation. If school language is mainly non-interactive, we cannot expect that children will be able to acquire it on their own. It may be that schools are not set up to <u>teach</u> language skills, but only to promote them in children who already have a basic background in them because of their home experiences.

Third, linguistic skill is necessary for academic language proficiency. This feature is particularly relevant for children learning English as a second language. For Cummins, for example,

one key variable in children's success with language at school is the degree to which linguistic skills are automatic vs. the degree to which they require cognitive involvement for understanding meaning.

And finally, academic language proficiency depends on content knowlege, particularly metalinguistic knowledge. Since one of the primary content areas of schooling is language, success in school depends in part on having the ability to read, listen, talk, and write about language, judging grammaticality and ambiguity, and defining words.

Critics of the concept of academic language argue that children's failure at school must be seen as a school-based problem, not a problem of the children's backgrounds. From this point of view, the only distinction between interpersonal and academic language is not the presence or absence of particular cognitive or linguistic abilities on the part of the children, but rather the presence or absence of meaningfulness vs. artificiality in the tasks children are asked to do. This view criticizes the kinds of language tasks that our schools set for children, arguing that the construct of academic language is bound up with culture-specific types of literacy and experience with the written language which may not be relevant for all children. Children cannot be expected to succeed in learning if schooling is made discontinuous with their everyday experiences with language.

Even if academic language is culture-specific as these critics maintain, it still exists as a hurdle in this society for language minority children, and therefore it is an important topic for

investigation. We do not think of it as a rigidly definable style or register; rather, like many sociolinguistics constructs, it exists along a continuum of more and less. Language use in academic settings reflects the cultural patterns of our schools (norms of behavior) and the requirements of the medium (oral or written) as it responds to other situational characteristics such as participants, topic and physical setting. Viewed from a sociolinguistic perspective, then, academic language can be grounded in the cultural and linguistic context which produces it, without any necessary link to cognitive development.

Recent research has made great contributions to our knowledge of the language uses in the classroom, but much remains to be done. The cultural and interactive features of academic language can be further identified and specified through ethnographic studies of children's home communities and school experiences. The linguistic features and metalinguistic requirements of academic language should also be further specified to make us more conscious of the real content of schooling in our society and what we expect children to be able to do with language.

Thus, the place for academic language, we believe, is in the social context of the classroom and similar settings. We have much to learn from careful observations of what goes on in these situations, particularly from more and less successful interactions. We need to ask participants to account for their behaviors and beliefs; we need to look at the language requirements of specific registers; we need to investigate

techniques for maximizing the use of the language skills which children already have when they come to school.

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